

The invention in which an exclusive right is claimed is defined by the following:

1. A method for facilitating automated sale of softgoods, comprising the steps of:

(a) providing a program to a creator of the softgoods that automatically includes a unique identifier in each softgood before the softgood is distributed to prospective purchasers, said unique identifier specifically referencing the creator of the softgoods;

(b) distributing the softgoods to prospective purchasers; and

(c) providing an agency having a server that implements softgood purchase transactions and maintains a database in which data relating to the sale of softgoods are stored, unique identifiers of the softgoods being referenced in the database to track the softgood purchase transactions.

2. The method of Claim 1, wherein the unique identifier for each softgood also references a unique identifier for the program provided to the creator, said program being used to create the softgood.

3. The method of Claim 1, wherein the program automatically communicates the unique identifier for the softgood over a network to the server for storage in the database.

4. The method of Claim 1, wherein the unique identifier of the softgood is communicated to the agency for storage in the database by the server during the purchase transaction for said softgood.

5. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of automatically including a base price within each softgood prior to the step of distributing the softgoods.

6. The method of Claim 1, further comprising the step of providing a program for playing the softgood that also communicates with the server to enable the purchase of the softgood.

7. The method of Claim 1, wherein the unique identifier for a softgood is communicated to the e-commerce agency and entered into the database when the softgood is first purchased.

8. A method for facilitating purchase of a softgood that is freely distributed to prospective purchasers for preview within a player program and which includes a unique identifier that is assigned to the softgood before the softgood is distributed, comprising the steps of:

(a) enabling prospective purchasers to preview the softgood with the player program to a limited extent, prior to deciding to purchase the softgood;

(b) enabling purchase of the softgood from within the player program by connecting a computer on which the player program is executing with the e-commerce agency to initiate a network transaction, purchase of the softgood causing related data to be recorded in the database of the e-commerce agency and causing a registration value that references the unique identifier to be transmitted to the computer on which the player program is executing; and

(c) using the player program, registering the softgood on the computer employed for the network transaction using the registration value provided by the e-commerce agency, registration of the softgood on the computer enabling the softgood to be played by the player program beyond the limited extent of the preview.

9. The method of Claim 8, further comprising the step of including at least one of an identification of a creator of the softgood, an identification of a software product used to produce the softgood, and a price in the softgood prior to its distribution.

10. The method of Claim 8, further comprising the steps of using the player program to transmit an identification of a purchaser of the softgood to the e-commerce agency during the network transaction, to enable the e-commerce agency to debit a financial account of the purchaser for a purchase price of the softgood.

11. The method of Claim 10, wherein financial account numbers of purchasers of softgoods are stored in the database, a financial account number of a purchaser being used to debit an account of said purchaser as a result of the network transaction.

12. The method of Claim 8, wherein the step of registering comprises the step of modifying the softgood to include the registration value and recording the registration value in a file, said registration value referencing at least one of an identification of the player program, an identification of the user, and the unique identifier for the softgood.

13. ~~The method of Claim 8, further comprising the step of including a prohibition of a purchaser modifying the softgood within the softgood.~~

14. The method of Claim 8, further comprising the step of registering each instance of the player program with a player identification in the database of the e-commerce agency.

15. The method of Claim 14, wherein the registration value comprises a combination of at least two of: the unique softgood identification, the player identification, and an identification of the purchaser of the softgood.

16. The method of Claim 8, wherein the softgood is not usable on the computer for more than a predefined number of times, unless registered on the computer.

17. The method of Claim 8, wherein the step of enabling prospective purchasers to preview the softgood comprises the step of permitting the softgood to be played with only a substantially reduced quality, unless registered on the computer.

18. The method of Claim 8, further comprising the step of sending a message over the network to advise a purchaser of the registration value that was used to register the softgood on the computer of the purchaser.

19. A computer-readable medium having computer-executable instructions comprising the player program, for performing the steps recited in Claim 8.

20. A method for controlling play of a softgood on a computer using a player program, said player program also being employed to purchase the softgood through a network transaction, comprising the steps of:

(a) enabling a user to preview the softgood on the computer within the player program; and

(b) enabling the user to purchase the softgood through a transaction conducted from within the player program.

21. The method of Claim 20, wherein after the user has purchased the softgood, further comprising the step of registering the softgood on the computer using a registration value provided during the transaction, said registration value identifying a software program used to create the softgood, registration of the softgood on the computer providing access to the softgood in accord with a license to the softgood so that it is thereafter playable on the computer with the player program beyond a preview limit.

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22. The method of Claim 21, wherein if the softgood is transferred to a different computer after being purchased, the softgood must again be registered on the different computer to enable the softgood to be played beyond the preview limit on the different computer.

23. The method of Claim 21, wherein the registration value includes at least one of:

- (a) a unique identifier for the softgood;
- (b) a unique identifier for the player program;
- (c) an identifier for a creator of the softgood; and
- (d) a name of the purchaser of the softgood.

24. The method of Claim 20, further comprising the steps of:

- (a) confirming that a financial account number provided by a purchaser is valid and is approved for purchase of the softgood by checking the financial account number with an approval service during the transaction; and if the financial account number is valid and approved,
- (b) transmitting the registration value to the purchaser; and if not,
- (c) advising the purchaser that purchase of the softgood was disapproved.

25. The method of Claim 21, further comprising the step of maintaining a database on an e-commerce server in which an identification of each purchaser and a list of each softgood purchased by each purchaser are included, to facilitate distribution of at least a portion of the purchase price of the softgood to a creator of the softgood, and to store the registration value so that the purchaser can again reregister the softgood on a computer if the registration of the softgood on the computer is lost.

26. The method of Claim 25, wherein data stored in the database also include a financial account number for each purchaser of softgoods, said financial account numbers being provided by the purchasers, further comprising the step of charging the financial account referenced by the financial account number of a purchaser during the transaction.

27. The method of Claim 26, further comprising the step of encrypting the financial account number for transmittal over the network to the database.

28. The method of Claim 27, wherein the player program is used to encrypt a communication for transmission over the network during the transaction.

29. The method of Claim 25, wherein the database also includes a current price for each softgood, further comprising the step of advising a purchaser of the current price of the softgood being purchased during the transaction.

30. The method of Claim 21, further comprising the step of employing the player program to transmit information over a network to an e-commerce agency to implement purchase of a softgood, using a secure communication protocol.

31. A computer-readable medium having computer-executable instructions for performing the steps recited in Claim 20.

32. A system for facilitating purchase of a softgood of which copies are freely distributed to prospective purchasers for preview prior to purchase, said softgood including a unique identifier that is included within the softgood before its distribution, comprising:

(a) a purchaser computer that includes a first processor, a first memory in which a plurality of machine instructions are stored that implement a plurality of functions when executed by the processor, a first network interface coupling the computer in communication with a network, at least one user interface for input of data to the memory, and a display on which graphics and text are displayed;

(b) a remote computer that includes a second processor, a second memory in which are stored a plurality of machine instructions that implement a plurality of functions when executed by the second processor, and in which a database containing data relating to purchases of softgoods are stored, a second network interface coupling the remote computer in communication with the network and thereby selectively coupling the remote computer in data communication with the purchaser computer via the network;

(c) a softgood comprising machine instructions or media data that are loaded into the first memory of the purchaser computer, other of the machine instructions stored in the first memory comprising a player program that uses the softgood, said player program carrying out a plurality of the functions when the machine instructions of the player program are executed by the first processor, including:

(i) enabling the softgood to be previewed to a limited extent prior to the user purchasing the softgood;

(ii) enabling the user to purchase the softgood in a transaction with the remote computer that is conducted over the network;

(iii) registering the softgood on the purchaser computer after the softgood has been purchased, said softgood being thus registered using a registration value provided by the remote computer; and

(iv) checking for the registration of the softgood on the purchaser computer and enabling the softgood to be used by the player program beyond the limited extent of the preview only if the softgood is determined to be registered on the purchaser computer; and

(d) wherein said plurality of functions implemented by said second processor in the remote computer include:

(i) responding to a request to purchase the softgood received over the network from the purchaser computer;

(ii) confirming an approval of a credit purchase by the user of the purchaser computer with a credit approval agency that is coupled to the network;

(iii) determining the registration value as a function of at least the unique identifier of the softgood and sending the registration value to the remote computer over the network to register the softgood on the purchaser's computer; and

(iv) allocating a portion of a purchase price of the softgood set by terms of a prior agreement to a creator of the softgood.

33. The system of Claim 32, wherein the plurality of functions implemented by the second processor include:

(a) checking the data stored in the database to determine if data for the user purchasing a softgood are already included within the database; and if so,

(b) using a financial account number included in the data for implementing the purchase of the softgood; and

(c) storing the unique identifier for the softgood purchased in association with the user, within the data of the database.

34. The system of Claim 32, wherein the registration value is further based on at least one of:

- (a) a user identifier that identifies the purchaser of the softgood;
- (b) an identifier for the creator of the softgood;
- (c) a unique identification for the player program; and
- (d) an identification of the purchaser of the softgood.

35. A system for facilitating automated sale of softgoods from which a revenue stream is returned to each creator of the softgoods, each softgood including a unique identifier, comprising:

(a) creator computers that execute one or more software programs used by the creators of the softgoods to produce the softgoods and to assign the unique identifier to the softgoods produced thereby, said creator computers including network interfaces that couple the creator computers to a network, the creators of the softgoods entering into agreements with an e-commerce agency in which the e-commerce agency agrees to facilitate the automated sale of the softgoods and to return a portion of the revenue stream from the automated sale to the creators of the softgoods; and

(b) a server computer operated by the e-commerce agency, said server computer maintaining a database in which data relating to the softgoods are stored, said data including unique identifiers for the softgoods, said server computer also including a network interface coupling the server computer in communication with the network and receiving the unique identifier for each softgood either from the creator computers before distribution of the softgood to prospective purchasers, or from a user of the softgood at a sale of the softgood, a purchase of a softgood being initiated when a softgood is being used, said purchase by a user of the softgood causing the server computer to confirm approval of a credit transaction for the user by an on-line communication with a credit approval agency, and if the credit transaction is approved, to transmit a registration value over the network to a computer of the user to register the softgood on the computer of the user, to enter data related to the purchase within the database.

36. The system of Claim 35, wherein the registration value is based upon at least one of the user's name, the unique identifier for the softgood, an identifier for the creator of the softgood, and a unique identification of a player program that is executed on the computer of the user to play the softgood.

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37. The system of Claim 35, wherein each of the softgoods include at least one of an identification of a software program used to produce the softgood, a identification of the creator of the softgood, and a price of the softgood.

38. The system of Claim 35, wherein the server computer sends a current price to the user before the purchase is completed, said current price being stored in the data of the database.

39. The system of Claim 35, wherein the softgood enables the user to purchase the softgood when executed on the computer of the user.

40. The system of Claim 35, wherein a player program that is used to play the softgood communicates with the server computer over the network to facilitate the purchase of the softgood.

41. The system of Claim 35, wherein a preview of the softgood to a limited extent is permitted on the computer of the user before the softgood is purchased, and once the softgood is registered on the computer of the user using the registration value, use of the softgood on the computer of the user is permitted to an extent determined by a license of the softgood.

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